New U.S. marshal went from Texas to the White House and back again

Odessan led high-profile life guarding presidents with Secret Service

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SAN ANTONIO -- Secret Service agent Lafayette Collins was alone when he answered the phone in the Andrews Air Force Base VIP room on Inauguration Day 1981. President Jimmy Carter had just left office and was about to board an airplane outside that would take him home to Georgia.

"Can you get a message to the president?" a State Department official asked Collins. "Tell him that the hostages have just cleared Iranian air space."

Passing a historic message to a departing president -- about the fate of 52 Americans seized from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran 14 1/2 months earlier -- is one in a lifetime of rich memories for the 55-year-old Round Rock resident.

Collins is the first African American U.S. marshal in the Western District of Texas, which includes Austin. He was nominated by President Bush and approved by the Senate earlier this year.

One of 94 U.S. marshals nationwide, Collins is in charge of 146 people who secure federal courthouses, protect judges, guard federal prisoners and chase down fugitives. His district covers more than 93,000 square miles and 68 Texas counties.

Among them is the West Texas county where he grew up in the waning days of segregation, raised by his widowed mother. She taught him: "Get yours by yourself. . . . Nobody's going to give you anything."

So Lafayette Collins left Odessa and went to college. He joined the U.S. Army and went to Vietnam, where he worked in counterintelligence. He came back and served 21 years in the U.S. Secret Service, protecting six sitting and former presidents.

"You always have dreams when you are a kid," Collins said. "You read and you see successes of others. I remember believing everything I read."

In his San Antonio office -- he typically spends three days a week there and two in Austin -- Collins answers questions slowly and calmly, after a few moments of thought.

Those who have known him the longest say that measured approach has driven his success since childhood.

"I taught him to study and to always, always be sure," said his mother, Janie Collins, 79.

Lafayette Collins' father died when he was 4. His mother supported him and his two older sisters by working as a maid. Aunts and uncles, teachers and others in the predominantly black

neighborhood south of the tracks helped raise him.

"It was this whole business: It takes a village to raise a child," said Jewel Downing, 73, who was Collins' seventh-grade teacher and now lives in Austin.

For Collins, a turning point came during elementary school when a woman from the neighborhood knocked on his door one morning and brought him to his first Sunday school session. He went back every week.

"I never had any reason to question who I was or where I was headed," Collins said. "Church gave me that sense of person . . . at an early age."

One of his uncles, Duncan Brown, a paratrooper from the Army's 82nd Airborne, left Collins with an enduring goal during a visit when Collins was a child. Brown left behind a pair of his shiny black boots near the door of the Collins house and told his nephew, "Whenever you are able to wear these boots, you are ready to join the Army."

The boots remained untouched near the door for years.

After Collins graduated from the last segregated class at Blackshear High School, he wanted to join the military. His mother had other plans. They drove across the state to Prairie View A&M, about 50 miles northwest of Houston.

It was a few days before classes began. As his mother headed home, Collins walked into the admissions office and said he wanted to take classes.

Had he applied? they asked. No, Collins said.

A day later, the historically black university had found his SAT score and told Collins that he was admitted and would receive financial aid to cover part of his tuition.

After his sophomore year in 1968, Collins earned a scholarship to take summer classes at Columbia University in New York City.

He arrived on campus shortly after student-led protesters seized control of the university's administration building to condemn the school's involvement in defense research and what they saw as its insensitivity to its black neighbors. It was one of the largest student uprisings in American history, and reverberations continued at Columbia and other universities that summer. Collins was wide-eyed.

"I am a country kid from Odessa, and I am in the mix," Collins recalled. "The feeling was thick. I was just taking it all in."

He followed one protest march through Harlem and back to the university. When one student leader said the goal of the protest was to overthrow the government, Collins decided to go back to his dorm.

He graduated from Prairie View with a political science degree, then joined the Army and went to Vietnam after a superior told him that the war was ending and that combat experience would look good on his résumé. Six months after arriving in Vietnam, Collins said, he was put in charge of

counterintelligence for about one-third of the Army troops there.

"A war looks a certain way on TV, but it tastes and smells and feels a lot different when you get up close to the people," he said. "You learn to care for different people. It defines your character."

He spent seven years in the Army, rising to the rank of captain, before calling the Secret Service. They told him that they hadn't hired anyone in two years and weren't looking. Collins applied anyway and got a job.

He was assigned to the Chicago field office, working on anti-counterfeiting operations and occasionally protecting important people. He was one of three black agents in an office of about 70.

Along the way, he got married, had three children, then got divorced. He's now married to Round Rock real estate agent Corma Collins; they have a 13-year-old daughter.

He keeps many of his memories from his Secret Service years to himself, not wanting to violate the trust of those he protected or to give away the strategies of the service.

Collins will tell a few good stories about President Reagan, whom he called the "king of the one-liners."

Collins joined Reagan's personal security detail in 1983. On his first day, he was put in the front position of a team that escorted the president each morning from his living quarters in the White House to the Oval Office. His job was to get far enough ahead of Reagan to unlock the door of the Oval Office and open it without disrupting the president's stride.

The door wouldn't open. Collins said he nervously tried to work the key, watching the president draw closer.

When Reagan reached the door, Collins was still trying to work the lock.

Collins does his best impression of Reagan's voice when he quotes the president: "Has there been a coup?"

Collins remembers how people mobbed Reagan during a tribute and how Frank Sinatra, the show's host, cleared a path for Reagan with one sentence: "Hey, youse people, they want to move the president."

"Well," Reagan quipped, "now you know who the most powerful man in this room is."

Collins left the Reagan detail in 1987 for a job in the Austin office of the Secret Service. He retired from the service in 1999 and was appointed by then-Gov. George Bush to the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles.

Bush tapped him again last year to replace U.S. Marshal Jack Dean, a Clinton appointee. He was confirmed by the Senate on March 8.

Collins said he hopes to ultimately raise the profile of the service and to team more with local law enforcement in tracking down fugitives.

"I'm still looking forward," he said.

Last month, Collins returned to Odessa when the chamber of commerce and other groups held a reception in his honor and declared him the first native Odessan presidential appointee. Earlier this month, he returned again to speak at a high school reunion.

"It's always nice to have someone from the same background to be as successful as Lafayette has been," said a lifelong friend and former Blackshear classmate, John Bowser. "It's a positive reflection for all of us . . . a sense of pride."